

Epistemic Authority

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Do not be scared by the word authority. Believing things on authority only means believing them because you have been told them by someone you think trustworthy. Ninety-nine per cent of the things you believe are believed on authority

C.S. Lewis

“Lightheaded submission to authority is the greatest enemy of truth”

Albert Einstein¹

Abstract: Epistemic authority is authority we ascribe to people in virtue of their favorable relation to epistemic goods such as true belief, rational credence, knowledge, or understanding. Exactly how should we react when learning the views of an epistemic authority? This question has provoked much controversy in recent years. The chapter gives an overview of the debate, develops taxonomies for structuring it, and engages in opinionated discussions of the most influential positions that have been argued for. The core questions are: (1) the explication question: What constitutes epistemic authority? (2) the identification question: In what ways can relative non-authorities identify (individual or collective) epistemic authorities? (3) the deference question: Exactly what does it involve rationally to assign special epistemic weight to the views of an epistemic authority? (4) the transmission question: Which epistemic goods can agents obtain from epistemic authorities, and what are the mechanisms of, and success conditions for, the transmission of these goods?

In the second part of this chapter (sections 5-6) I critically discuss preemptionism, an influential answer to the deference question which says that we should always adopt the authority's views and also replace all of our own reasons relevant to the topic at hand by the

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Case for Christianity*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009, p. 62, originally published 1943/44; Albert Einstein, *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, Vol. 1, ed. John Stachel et al., document 115: letter to Jost Winteler, 8 July 1901, p. 309. The German original uses the uncommon locution “Autoritätsdusel” and says: “Autoritätsdusel ist der größte Feind der Wahrheit“, translation C.J.

sole reason that the authority believes what they do. I argue that preemptionism faces a number of serious objections.

1. Preliminary observations

Social epistemology explores the ways in which we rationally rely on others when pursuing our epistemic ends. Sometimes epistemically interacting agents are (at least roughly) on a par regarding their knowledge and competences in a given domain; they constitute *epistemic peers*. Often, however, we find ourselves in epistemically asymmetrical positions. I inquire about your views on the Covid-19 pandemic, but whereas I am a layperson in the field you are a versed virologist and respected member of the relevant scientific community who professionally collects and interprets genetic data about the virus, constructs epidemiological models and simulations of its contagion patterns, squares your results with those of other experts, and so on. In this case, you are in a highly advanced epistemic position regarding these topics and, special cases aside, it is rational for me to treat you not as my epistemic peer, but as my *epistemic authority* in the domain. What exactly does this involve?

If we treat someone as an epistemic authority (for short, *authority*) we assign special epistemic weight to his or her views pertaining to the relevant domain or discipline. In other areas, the authority will typically lack epistemic advantages over the layperson or non-authority²; after all, (human) epistemic authorities do not normally enjoy *universal* authority. (You are the virologist, I am the epistemologist, or the plumber, or whatever.) We should also relativize ascriptions of authority to epistemic goods. One person, for example, may be in an epistemically advanced position regarding knowledge, whereas another may have greater understanding.

Call an authority who lacks epistemic superiors in a given discipline (or domain) *D* regarding an epistemic good *G* an *ultimate* authority with respect to *D* and *G*. If in addition the authority lacks epistemic equals, they constitute a *unique* authority in *D* and concerning *G*.³ But a person can constitute an authority *simpliciter* for others without satisfying any of these three U's. Moreover, authority relations are dynamic: as time goes by, the authority may lose

² Novices, but not generally laypeople, are persons who aspire to acquire epistemic competences in the relevant domain. The term "(relative) non-authority" is broader and covers persons who are neither laypeople nor novices.

³ My uses of "universal" and "ultimate" follow De George (1985:21, and *passim*).

the relevant competences, or the layperson or novice may acquire them and take over. Relativization to times is also needed, in particular, to handle the so-called *outrageous belief problem*. If one day your doctor, whose advice used to be sane and safe, asks you to take 4000 pills per day, you should stop treating her as your medical authority (cf. Zagzebski 2012:116). Which other features make room for such dynamics is a matter of debate. Grundmann (2021) argues that laypersons or novices can always employ domain-independent reasons to assess whether someone who used to be an authority for them should still be treated as one. For example, one may rationally reject claims from a putative authority by relying on (i) social evidence (other authorities may disagree), (ii) logical evidence (the putative authority may have made logical mistakes) or (iii) defeaters from other disciplines (implications of the claim under consideration for other topics are false).

So far, “authority” referred to persons, but the term also denotes the properties in virtue of which we treat persons as authorities. We also talk of non-personal information systems (such as theories, doctrines, traditions, or instruments) having authority. Since these are products of epistemic agency, however, arguably the more fundamental notion is the authority held and exercised by persons.

A final introductory observation is that, like authority generally, epistemic authority is not confined to single individuals.⁴ We also acquire authoritative information from collective agents such as specialist teams, scientific communities, etc. This raises a number of specific questions. If there is such a thing as group authority, then how does it relate to the authority of individual group members? How should authoritative group beliefs or other collective epistemic goods be construed in the first place? Can group members have authority just because they are group members? Such questions cannot be pursued here⁵, but much of what follows about individual epistemic authority also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to collective epistemic authority.

2. Epistemic versus objectivist accounts, and a functional characterization

⁴ Levy (2007:188, emphasis added) even claims that “epistemic authorities are ... *constituted* to the extent to which they consist in a distributed network of agents”.

⁵ For initial forays into collective epistemic authority see Zagzebski (2012, ch. 7); Hauswald (2024); or Croce (2019b).

Epistemic authority is standardly classified as an instance of theoretical authority, as opposed to practical authority. This division is important but glosses over complexities. First, there are mixed forms. Often agents enjoy some form of practical authority in virtue of their epistemic achievements. The head of the local fire department has been accorded executive and administrative authority (which are forms of practical authority) in view of her superior knowledge about conflagration, rescuing people from burning houses, and so on.

Recent discussions have also shown that the alleged boundary between epistemic and practical rationality is fuzzy, since practical interests often encroach on the epistemic.⁶ In consequence, whether *A* constitutes an epistemic authority for *S* may not only vary with the domain and the epistemic goal under consideration, but also with what is at stake for *A* and *S*. If your life depends on having the right view on a certain topic, you will choose your authorities more carefully than otherwise. Independently from such considerations various authors, most notably Raz (1988, 2009) and, inspired by him, Keren (2007, 2014a), McMyler (2011), and Zagzebski (2012), have influentially argued that there are important structural similarities between epistemic and, specifically, political authority.⁷ In particular, these authors argue that both political authorities and epistemic authorities give us “preemptive reasons” to accept their commands or beliefs, respectively. I return to this topic shortly.

Let us distinguish *objectivist* from *subjectivist* or, as I shall say, *epistemic* accounts of epistemic authority. Concerning the latter, some writers characterize authorities as persons whom others *judge* or *believe* to have certain qualities, and some maintain that the non-authority’s judgment is both necessary and sufficient.⁸ The motivation behind such approaches may be to explain why people act in certain ways when engaging with (what they perceive to be) an authority. Such authors hold that:

⁶ For recent discussions see, e.g., the contributions in Kim and McGrath (2019).

⁷ McMyler (2014) and Dormandy (2018) argue that Zagzebski’s account of epistemic authority corresponds less closely to Raz’s theory of political authority than she suggests. McMyler (2020) observes, among other things, that whereas one can obey practical authorities without trusting them to command the right action, one cannot believe an epistemic authority without trusting them for the truth.

⁸ Cf. for example our opening quotation from C.S. Lewis; Constantin and Grundmann (2020); and Bokros (2021:7): “*A* is an epistemic authority for *S* with respect to *p* iff *S* judges *A* to have a higher expected accuracy with respect to *p* than *S* takes herself to have independently of following *A*’s authority”.

EA_E: *A* is an epistemic authority for *S* in domain *D* at a given (period of) time *t* and relative to some epistemic good *G*, iff *S* believes *A* to be in a substantially advanced epistemic position in *D* relative to *S*, at or during *t*, with respect to the goal of acquiring or sustaining *G*.

Requiring a *substantially* advanced epistemic position reflects that the epistemic distance between the parties must not be too small. (For example, if *A* is right 80% of the time and *S* is right 78% of the time, we would not normally consider *A* *S*'s authority.) On the other hand, too great an epistemic distance may also cause problems for the non-authority's aspiration to epistemically profit from the authority. Authorities who are disciplinary experts, for example (see section 4), rely on complex background knowledge and technical vocabulary which typically escape the novice's grasp. In general, the appropriate distance will depend on the circumstances, including parameters such as domain, goals, and stakes.

Since accounts in the spirit of EA_E only require the agent's belief that the relevant source is in advanced epistemic position, they allow for cases in which *A* qualifies as *S*'s epistemic authority even though in fact *A* lacks epistemic superiority and is *S*'s epistemic peer or even *S*'s epistemic inferior. Relatedly, on such accounts authority is neither asymmetric nor transitive. (They allow *A* to be *S*'s authority and *S* to be simultaneously *A*'s authority; and they allow *A** to be an authority for *A*, and *A* to be one for *S*, even though *A** fails to be an authority for *S*. *S* may have the relevant beliefs about *A* but not about *A**) Even on purely epistemic accounts, however, the relation remains irreflexive: no-one is (synchronically) an epistemic authority over him- or herself.⁹

Let us say that *A* is a *de facto* epistemic authority vis-à-vis *S* iff—irrespective of what *S* believes about *A*—*A* actually enjoys a substantial amount of epistemic superiority over *S* (in some domain *D* and regarding some specified epistemic good *G*). Approaches that treat this requirement as necessary and sufficient for epistemic authority I call “purely objectivist”. We obtain the definition if we substitute, in EA_E, the locution “iff *S* believes *A* to be in a substantially advanced epistemic position” by “iff *A* is in a substantially advanced epistemic position”. In purely objectivist accounts, we have the relations of irreflexivity, asymmetry, and transitivity, where asymmetry follows immediately from irreflexivity and transitivity. (If the

⁹ I set aside potential arguments from dissociative identity disorder (“split selves”). I do not exclude that we may enjoy epistemic authority over our selves as they were at other times. (We legitimately say things such as: “Now I know better!”).

relation were symmetric, it would follow with transitivity that *A* is (at *t*) an authority for herself, which irreflexivity prohibits.)

In addition to purely epistemic and purely objectivist approaches, there is room for combined accounts. Call *A* a *recognized* epistemic authority regarding *S* iff *S* *truly* believes that *A* is a *de facto* authority vis-à-vis *S*. More precisely:

EA_R: *A* is a (recognized) epistemic authority for *S* in *D* at *t*, and relative to *G*, iff *S* truly believes *A* to be in a substantially advanced epistemic position in *D* relative to *S*, at or during *t*, with respect to the goal of acquiring or sustaining *G*.

Other distinctions drawn above can be incorporated in fairly straightforward ways. For example, *A* is an ultimate epistemic authority for *S* in the sense of EA_R iff the conditions mentioned in EA_R hold and, in addition, *S* truly believes that no one else is in a better epistemic position than *A* (in *D* and with respect to *G*). Note, moreover, that, whereas the objective component (the requirement of actual epistemic superiority) ensures that irreflexivity and asymmetry hold, transitivity breaks down in EA_R, since this definition incorporates a belief component. It allows *A** to be an authority for *A*, and *A* to be one for *S*, even though *A** fails to be an authority for *S*; for *S* may have the relevant beliefs about *A* but not about *A**.

I noted that too great an epistemic distance between the authority and the novice or layperson may prevent the latter from fruitfully engaging with the authority. But often authorities *are* in the position, and prepared, to serve their interlocutors' specific epistemic needs and to foster epistemic progress not only in the specialist community, but also for novices and laypersons. David Coady argues that an expert "is someone laypeople can go to in order to receive accurate answers to their questions" (2012:30).¹⁰ This carries over to expert authorities and epistemic authorities more generally. Fulfilling this function requires not only disciplinary competence but also communicative skills and intellectual and didactic virtues (see section 6). Incorporating the core idea of such functional approaches, we may say that:

EA_{RF}: *A* is a (recognized) epistemic authority for *S* in *D* at *t* and relative to *G*, iff *S* truly believes *A* to be able, and prepared, to help *S* achieving *S*'s epistemic goals in *D* and with respect to *G*, where this ability is due to *A* being in a substantially advanced

¹⁰ Goldman (2018) endorses such views; for discussion see Croce (2019b).

epistemic position in *D*, relative to *S*, at or during *t*, and with respect to the goal of acquiring or sustaining *G*.

There is no doubt that our intellectual lives widely and fundamentally depend on the intellectual labor of others. Often deference to authorities, as Zagzebski observes, is simply a “strategy for intellectual economy” (2012:189). In many cases, however, we *deeply* depend on others, since we ourselves lack the resources to attain knowledge or understanding of a topic that concerns us. Given this predicament, is there room for rational disagreement, not only with epistemic peers, but with *recognized epistemic authorities*?

Enlightenment traditions emphasize the value of epistemic autonomy and answer positively. Others balk: confronted with an authority’s views, they argue, the layperson should (special cases aside) always adopt them. Some argue that in such cases we should even replace all of our own reasons relevant to the topic by the sole reason that the authority believes what they do; the fact that the authority holds these beliefs is said to preempt all other relevant reasons we might have. Call this view *preemptionism*.¹¹ Recently, however, preemptionism has come under fire. The general worry is that it confers too much weight upon the authority and embraces too strong a form of epistemic dependence on the part of laypeople.¹² I discuss this controversy in section 5. For now, those who value autonomy may construe the general task of the theory of epistemic authority as that of bringing into balance the dictates of rational deference with the ideals of intellectual self-governance. A plausible starting point is the conjecture that neither should rational deference to authorities collapse into total epistemic submission, nor should the ideal of mature intellectual self-governance be conflated with (illusions of) “complete epistemic autonomy” (Fricker 2006) or epistemic autarky.

Does our topic have any significance beyond social epistemology as a specialized academic discipline? Recently, the Oxford Dictionaries chose “post truth” as word of the year.¹³ This notion covers at least two phenomena: (i) an increasing dissemination of, and gullibility concerning, “fake news”, plus (ii) an increasing contamination of public discourse

¹¹ Watson (2022:136) calls it the “doxastic control account of epistemic authority” and the kind of deference it dictates “strong deference”. Proponents include Raz (1988, 2009); Keren (2007, 2014a, 2014b); Zagzebski (2012, 2013, 2014, 2016); Bungum (2018); Constantin and Grundmann (2020), forthcoming; Grundmann (2021). Popowicz (2019) defends higher-order preemptionism concerning the layperson’s methodological views about doxastic practices.

¹² See, e.g., Anderson (2014); McMyler (2014); Jäger (2016); Wright (2016); Lackey (2016), (2018), (2021); Watson (2018); Hauswald (2021); Jäger and Malfatti (2020); [Watson \(2022\)](#); [Jäger \(forthcoming\)](#)

¹³ See, e.g., <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/word-of-the-year/?cc=at&lang=en&>.

with irrational, often bizarre conspiracy theories. Discussion of these phenomena is beyond the scope of this chapter, yet arguably they share the following feature: among other ugly epistemic sins both conspiracy narrators and serial fake-news believers typically misidentify their epistemic authorities. They mistake charlatans and pseudo-authorities, sometimes including themselves, for trustworthy informants and reliable advisors.¹⁴ Moreover, like all kinds of authority, epistemic authority comes with power, and power can be, and often is, misused. Exploring epistemic authority will also shed light on such topics, thereby yielding insights into issues of considerable social and political significance.

3. General asserter authority; the core questions

Epistemic asymmetries are the rule, not the exception. Consider our practice of asking questions. As Goldman notes, in what is arguably its central and prototypical case, questioners “direct their interrogatories at *authoritative* informants” (1999:3, emphasis C.J.). Consider also the speaker’s perspective. In a pioneering study, Welbourne observes that “[a]nyone who ventures to tell another that *p* to that extent assumes the mantle of authority and anyone who believes another to that extent defers to authority” (1986:67). Call this kind of authority “general asserter authority” or, for short, *asserter authority*. Two points are worth noting.

First, asserter authority may concern a single proposition, including propositions the speaker knows because they have a “thin epistemic advantage over us” (Watson 2022:151). (You call me from another part of the world and tell me that the sun is shining there.) Disciplinary authority, too, typically manifests itself as asserter authority. Yet in this case the speaker’s assertions are authoritative at least in part because of their systematic disciplinary knowledge, understanding, etc., concerning some larger theoretical domain.

Second, asserter authority may be construed in two ways. (i) A listener may take a speaker’s assertion that *p* as a source of information and as linguistic evidence for *p*. (ii) However, some authors have argued for a so-called second-personal, or interpersonal, account according to which *bare assertions* should be distinguished from *tellings*: when a speaker tells us that *p*, they implicitly invite us to trust them for the truth of *p* (Hinchman 2005; Faulkner 2011; Nickel 2012; Fricker 2012; Zagzebski 2012; Keren 2014a) or offer an assurance

¹⁴ A pioneering discussion of the significance of epistemic authority for conspiracy theories is Levy (2007). For various forms of fake or pseudo-authority see Jäger (2022).

of the truth of p (Moran 2005) which could be made explicit by adding: “Take my word for it!” In such acts of telling, it is argued, the speaker takes off the burden from the audience to “check for themselves” and, correspondingly, the audience is entitled to relegate justification challenges to the testifier.

Interpersonal accounts are controversial.¹⁵ It is an interesting question whether and, if so, in what way the reasons for belief that such views postulate combine with testimony taken as evidence and, if they do combine¹⁶, whether authority as construed by trust views or assurance views can add epistemic weight to the authority of testimony taken as evidence. Pursuing these topics would take us beyond the scope of this chapter.¹⁷

So far, four core questions have emerged:

- (1) Explication: What constitutes epistemic authority?
- (2) Identification: In what ways can relative non-authorities rationally identify (individual or collective) epistemic authorities?
- (3) Deference: Exactly what does rationally assigning special epistemic weight to the views of an epistemic authority involve? In particular: Does it require strong or complete epistemic deference in the sense preemptionists maintain?
- (4) Transmission: Which epistemic goods can agents obtain from authorities, and what are the mechanisms of, and success conditions for, the transmission of these goods?

The remainder of this chapter will sharpen these questions and outline directions in which answers may be developed.

4. Authorities versus experts

In our introductory virologist example, the authority is what may be called an *expert authority*¹⁸. However, though some discussions of expertise and epistemic authority treat

¹⁵ For criticisms see, e.g., Lackey (2008); Schmitt (2010); Koppelberg (2017).

¹⁶ For this view see, e.g., Keren (2014a).

¹⁷ For more on the epistemology of assertion see Kelp and Simion (this volume).

¹⁸ For discussions see Watson (2021, 2022) and Grundmann (forthcoming). See also Grundmann (this volume). I disagree with his views (i) that experts typically constitute authorities, and (ii) that laypersons ought to defer preemptively “to any of A’s judgments in D” no matter what their other reasons relevant to the topic are.

these notions interchangeably, not all experts constitute authorities and not all authorities are experts. Regarding the latter claim, asserter authority is a case in point: if you tell me what time it is, you “assume the mantle of authority,” though knowing the time is not a special discipline or domain with their distinctive authorities. Or consider Croce’s (2019a) example of the grandmother who serves as an epistemic authority for her grandchild on how fish breathe even though she is not much of an ichthyologist. Similarly, most parents serve as epistemic authorities in elementary algebra for their young children but do not have more true beliefs in this field than most people. Being an expert in a given community is not necessary for being an authority for some of its members.

Nor is it sufficient. The most influential account of expertise is Goldman’s, who argues that an expert’s body of true beliefs in the relevant domain must reach “some non-comparative threshold” (2001:145). In more recent work he says:

“*S* is an expert about domain *D* if and only if (A) *S* has more true beliefs (or high credences) in propositions concerning *D* than most people do, and fewer false beliefs; and (B) the absolute number of true beliefs *S* has about propositions in *D* is very substantial.” (2018:5)

Construed in this way, experts need not constitute authorities in the functional sense captured in EA_{RF} , since they may be unable, or unprepared, to help their interlocutors achieve the latter’s epistemic aims. In general, epistemic authority is subject-relative and does not require some general veritistic threshold.

5. To preempt or not to preempt?

5.1 Zagzebski’s account

Zagzebski (2012) has set much of the agenda of the current debate on epistemic authority.¹⁹ Her general answer to the explication question (1) above is that an epistemic authority is “someone who does what I would do if I were more conscientious or better than I am at satisfying the aim of conscientiousness—getting the truth” (109). This claim, she argues,

¹⁹ The title of section 5 is borrowed from Lackey (2016).

implies several others, most notably preemptionism, to be discussed in this and the next section.

Concerning the rational identification of an epistemic authority (core question (2)), Zagzebski considers two related epistemic goals and, following Raz, two corresponding “Justification theses for the Authority of Belief”:

“The first [JAB1] says that I should take someone as an epistemic authority when I conscientiously judge that believing what she believes or testifies is more likely to give me the truth than if I try to figure it out myself. The second [JAB2] says that I should take someone as an epistemic authority when I conscientiously judge that I am more likely to form a belief that will survive my conscientious self-reflection if I believe what the authority believes or testifies.” (2016:187, cf. 2012:110-111)

In a subsequent step Zagzebski argues that these theses yield the following preemptionist principle (an answer to our deference question (3)):

Preemption

“The fact that the authority has a belief p is a reason for me to believe p that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing p and is not simply added to them.” (2012:107; cf. 2013:296; cf. Raz 2009:155)

As she clarifies elsewhere, Zagzebski also construes preemptionism as an answer to the explication question. “The preemption thesis,” she writes, “is a thesis about what it means to take someone as an epistemic authority” (2014:176).

Finally, concerning the transmission of epistemic goods (core question (4) above), Zagzebski focuses on knowledge and belief and considers the speech act of telling—in the technical, second-person sense sketched above—to be the central mechanism of handing down these epistemic goods from the authority to the agent (2012, ch. 6).

Zagzebski conducts her discussions in terms of full (or outright, flat-out) belief. This leaves room for two ways of disagreeing with another person’s belief that p : disbelieving that p and withholding belief as to whether p . However, a more comprehensive picture should also consider graded or partial belief, which is standardly modelled in terms of credences (see, e.g.,

Jäger 2016; Dormandy 2018; Constantin and Grundmann 2020; Bokros 2021). Strictly speaking, any difference between the authority's credence and the non-authority's credence constitutes disagreement. Preemptionism, then, as applied to full as well as partial belief, involves two demands:

- PE: (1) If you learn that an epistemic authority holds the full or partial belief (credence) *B* about a given topic and that *B* differs from your own view of the topic, you should adopt *B*.
- (2) In such a case, you should replace your own reasons pertaining to the topic by the reason that the authority holds *B*.

Much could be said about each step of Zagzebski's rich and complex argument for preemptionism, and reviewers and critics have focused on various aspects of it.²⁰ Here I can only take up some key issues.

5.2. Objections to preemptionism

Zagzebski's central argument for preemptionism is the so-called track record argument. It harkens back to Raz and says that, since the authority, by definition, has a better track record in getting the truth (concerning questions of the type under consideration), we will maximize our chance of epistemic success if we follow the authority. In Raz's words, when "I endorse the authority's judgment my rate of mistakes declines and equals that of the authority... This shows that only by allowing the authority's judgment to preempt mine altogether will I succeed in improving my performance and bringing it to the level of the authority" (1988:68; for a more detailed discussion see Bokros 2021). However, some critics—call them *uncompromising anti-preemptionists*—argue that this argument fails and that preemption is never an epistemically appropriate response (Lackey 2016, 2018; Hauswald 2021). *Moderate anti-preemptionists* hold, *pace* Zagzebski, that preemption is not in fact a conceptual constraint on epistemic authority, yet that in certain circumstances—e.g., when the non-authority herself is completely clueless and the authority is known to be highly reliable—preempting may indeed be epistemically appropriate (Wright 2016; Jäger 2016; Dormandy

²⁰ See, e.g., the articles in *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6 (2014).

2018; Stewart 2020). In any case, at least when formulated as an unrestricted, general claim about the nature of authority, preemptionism meets with a number of worries.²¹

(i) *Authorities are not omniscient.* Epistemic authorities—at least ordinary, human ones—are neither omniscient nor infallible. Laypeople (or, more generally, non-authorities) may thus have reasons of their own that the authority lacks, and these reasons may be good ones. If we are unaware of (at least many of) the authority’s reasons, as will often be the case, should we generally assume that the authority will have considered all of our own reasons already?²² Consider the following autobiographic anecdote from Bocheński (1974:65-66). When he was a young pilot trainee, his “master, the flight instructor”, once asked him to plan and carry out a certain long-distance flight. After careful calculations, Bocheński concluded that he should pass point A at 9500 feet and then proceed to point B. When he presented his plan to the instructor, who knew the tour by heart, the latter replied: “Nonsense! Don’t fly at so high an altitude—5500 feet suffices—and don’t go through A—B, but through C—D.’ ‘Why?’, I asked. He gave no reply but entered his plane and set off. What was I to do?”²³ Bocheński eventually followed suit.

This story leaves open whether “the master” had been aware of Bocheński’s reasons, but it suggests that these reasons were good ones. In general, what warrants the assumption that A will always have considered S’s reasons? A may well not have. Moreover, in some cases S’s reason may even be better than A’s reasons, and S may know this (cf. Jäger 2016; Hauswald 2021; Bokros 2021; [Watson 2022:ch. 6](#)). In such cases preemption would not put S in a better epistemic position, but in a worse one.

To this line of thought Constantin and Grundmann respond that, when “the layperson has a method available to her for assessing the proposition’s truth-value that is at least as good as the authority’s methods” (2020:4117), the proposition supported by applying the method falls outside the authority’s domain of expertise and becomes “exoteric” to it. In their example, an astronomer predicts that a certain comet will be visible to the naked eye, yet a given layperson then finds that in fact they cannot see it at the relevant time on a clear evening. The authors concede that in such cases reasons aggregation instead of preemption

²¹ Zagzebski is of course free to adopt a stipulative definition of epistemic authority in terms of preemptionism. The objection then is that this definition fails to capture an important kind of epistemic authority or an important aspect of the notion.

²² This is the position of Constantin and Grundmann (2020); Grundmann (forthcoming).

²³ Translation from the German original by C. J.

will be rational for the layperson. But, Constantin and Grundmann's argument goes, this will no longer constitute a process of the layperson's balancing their reasons with an *authority's* reasons, since the proposition in question has become exoteric to the authority's domain of expertise.

More needs to be said, however. One question that arises is whether in cases where the layperson, instead of falsifying the astronomer's prediction, perceptually *verifies* it, the astronomer loses their authority over the layperson as well. In Constantin and Grundmann's account, the answer should presumably be yes. For in such cases, too, the layperson applies "a method that is at least as good as the authority's methods, namely perception". Hence, in this account here too "the proposition's truth-value ... no longer falls within the authority's domain of authority" (2020:4117). But this is an odd consequence: even when others confirm the authority's prediction, the latter is thereby being *discredited* as an authority. In general, on Constantin and Grundmann's account apparently every authority would lose their authority over *any* layperson once the authority's hypothesis becomes open to direct empirical confirmation or disconfirmation through the layperson. This cannot be right. Constantin and Grundmann's maneuver thus fails to provide a convincing answer to the anti-preemptionist's insistence that the layperson may have domain-specific reasons of their own which they can rationally keep in play.

As it stands, Preemption does not say anything about initial agreement or initial disagreement with the authority. The standard situation preemptionists seem to have in mind is disagreement. Yet, there are situations in which we learn that an authority shares our beliefs (Wright 2016; Jäger 2016; Dormandy 2018). In this case, two additional questions are whether the authority's set of reasons includes our own reasons and whether we are aware of the authority's reasons. Consider a belief-agreement situation. Preemption requires that, despite the authority's agreeing with us, we "screen off" all of our own reasons and replace them with the fact that the authority holds the same belief as we do. Suppose that we are unaware of *A's* reasons. In this case, whether or not our reasons are in fact included in *A's* reasons, would it not be rational for us to regard our agreement with *A* as supporting our view that our own reasons are good ones? Let *a* be our "authoritative reason" that *A* believes that *p*, and *r* be another pro-reason we have in support of *p*. Dormandy argues that, although *a* may suffice to confer justification upon believing that *p*, "the two reasons *a*, *r* offer better epistemic support to *p* than the single reason *a* does on its own" (2018:778). Dormandy presents this argument

in terms of Bayesian confirmation. Let e_1 be an evidential scenario in which we have a and no other relevant reasons; let e_2 be evidence consisting of a and another reason r , where a and r are consistent, logically independent, and do not lower each other's probability. The argument is that $\Pr(p|e_2) > \Pr(p|e_1)$: conditional on the conjunction of a and r , p is more probable than conditional on a alone, and thus e_2 provides better confirmation for p than e_1 .

On the other hand, often it will indeed be likely that an authority has considered all of our own reasons already. In this case, preemptionists argue, their critics (who maintain that we should still use our own reasons) run into the problem of *double counting*. It is far from clear, however, how this argument could be spelled out. Suppose that we base our belief that p on a non-conclusive reason r and learn that A has the same belief at least partly for the same reason. In that case, anti-preemptionists argue, what S can rationally add to r is the belief *that A believes, at least partly on the basis of r , that p* . This complex reason is not identical with r , and it is hard to see why it could not rationally be aggregated with r itself and supply additional support of p .

(ii) *Irrational communities*. Lackey (2018) argues that preemptionism leaves no room for agents to correct false or wildly irrational beliefs they acquired in "paradigmatically irrational communities." If, for example, the agent's thinking has been shaped by terrorists, white supremacists, or misguided religious leaders, the agent will select their authorities accordingly and conscientiously judge that a belief adopted from such authorities "is more likely to give me the truth than if I try to figure it out myself" (Zagzebski's JAB1), or that I am thereby "more likely to form a belief that will survive my conscientious self-reflection" (Zagzebski's JAB2). In such circumstances, Lackey argues, preemptionism does not have the resources to maintain that the authority's irrational beliefs should be rejected.

At first glance, one may be inclined to reply that the non-authority still has access to non-disciplinary evidence about the quality of the authority's verdicts (see Grundmann 2021 and section 1 above). However, while such measures may be available in some cases, in others they will not. The authority may not be guilty of any logical mistakes; disagreeing authorities may not be present; and incoherencies with other disciplines may not ensue. In short, the fact that sometimes non-disciplinary counterevidence may be available does not show that in an epistemically radically corrupted society preemptionism would generally allow for critical stances toward badly misguided authorities.

Note, however, that Lackey's problem arises specifically for what I have called the "subjective" or "epistemic account" of epistemic authority. It cannot be formulated in this way if we adopt an objective account in the sense of EA_R or EA_{RF} , which, I argued, are more appropriate than EA_E anyway. Recall that a recognized epistemic authority actually is in a substantially advanced epistemic position. Racists, confused religious leaders, etc. do not meet this requirement, hence they do not, on EA_R or EA_{RF} , count as (de facto) epistemic authorities in the first place. All this does of course not help with the practical problem that people often fail to pick the right authorities.

(iii) *Unhinging proper bases*. Exactly how is PE (2) to be understood? Zagzebski offers the negative characterization that replacing one's own reasons does not require ignoring them (2012:113). A natural way to cash this out is that we ought to relieve our own reasons of their role as epistemic bases for the relevant belief—in some technical sense of epistemic basing—or that we should downgrade them from doxastic to mere propositional justifiers (Jäger 2016; Dormandy 2018). This means that, when the layperson's reasons are good ones, preemption requires us to *unhinge proper bases*. But this looks like epistemic regress rather than progress (for a critical reply, however, see Keren 2020). An additional worry is that it may not even be psychologically possible to not ignore reasons that we take to be good ones, while still ceasing to use them (Anderson 2014; Jäger 2016).

(iv) *The trust argument*. Keren (2007, 2014a, 2020) develops what may be called a *trust argument for preemptionism* concerning the speech act of telling.²⁴ His core idea is that—contrary to what Hinchman, Moran, and others claim—tellings, although they constitute assurances, also provide evidence for the truth of the speaker's assertion. Moreover, Keren provides an alternative explanation of the special nature of assurances. He argues that they should be explained by the fact that they provide higher-order reasons for the listener to preempt their own reasons. The listener acquires a reason for "speaker trust": inspired by Annette Baier's observation that trust conceptually involves "accepted vulnerability" or that it requires "lowering one's guard" (Jon Elster), Keren argues that speaker trust accordingly involves lowering one's *epistemic guard*, and that this involves preempting one's own reasons. By contrast, keeping one's own reasons in play would amount to taking epistemic precautions against acquiring a false belief from the speaker. Epistemic *trustees* abandon such additional epistemic precautions; hence they preempt.

²⁴ For a related argument see also McMylor (2020).

Note, however, that Keren's claim is only that, *if* the listener accepts the invitation to trust, they preempt (or at least should do so). The anti-preemptionist has two replies. First, the crucial question is whether preemption is rational and hence whether it is rational to engage in preemptive speaker trust, as Keren construes it, in the first place. This might sometimes be rational, but often it will not. Keren's account gives us no answer to *this* question. Second, epistemic trust—like trust in general—is gradable. Why should our treating the speaker appropriately involve a degree of epistemic trust that requires lowering one's epistemic guard completely? When a testifier tells us that *p*, the rational reaction may be to assign special weight to their testimony, but not to preempt all of one's own reasons. *Lowering* one's epistemic guard need not, and often should not, amount to dropping it completely. Moreover, it is far from clear that taking moderate epistemic precautions in this way disregards the general spirit of tellings or violates, as Carter (this volume) calls it, the teller's "entitlement to expect to be presumed trustworthy".²⁵

For similar reasons Watson (2022, ch. 6) argues for a "normative presumption account of epistemic authority". The core idea is that an authority's testimony, advice, or performance (TAP) only constitutes prima facie justification for the agent. Whether the expert's or authority's "thick epistemic placement in a domain" provides full justification for the agent depends on factors outside of epistemic placement, including how well the authority understands the agent's interests (pp. 150-153).

5.3 Authority and understanding

Discussions of epistemic authority have traditionally focused on how we acquire belief and knowledge from authorities. But other epistemic goods may be relevant too. Jäger (2016)²⁶ argues that one such good is understanding and that preemptionist accounts are ill-suited to account for the fact that certain epistemic authorities foster understanding in their communities. Understanding may generally be characterized as grasping systematic connections among elements of a complex whole. In the epistemic realm this will typically involve an assessment, and reassessment, of the available reasons for and against a thesis or theory under consideration. Arguably, the degree to which a subject understands a topic

²⁵ For a discussion of core questions regarding epistemic trust see also Dormandy (2020).

²⁶ See also Croce (2019a) and Jäger and Malfatti (2020).

increases as they appreciate the relative epistemic weight of these reasons. Jäger proposes what may be called a guided *inquiry model of epistemic authority* and illustrates it with what he calls “Socratic authority”. Socratic authorities will typically not transmit first-order knowledge since, like Plato’s Socrates, they may lack such knowledge themselves. Qua authorities, however, they are still in a position to help interlocutors advance their understanding of a given topic, both by introducing them to new reasons and by showing them how to properly rearrange old ones in their systems of thought.

This aspect of an interaction between the layperson and the authority can also be illustrated by switching to the authority’s perspective. At least in many situations, paradigmatic epistemic authorities (such as school teachers, university professors, etc.) do not want their interlocutors simply to abandon all of their own reasons and substitute them with the authority’s views. Instead, they want pupils to understand where and why the pupils go wrong, if they go wrong, and where and why they are right and rational. The authority’s task, then, is to help the interlocutor assign the latter’s own reasons for and against a given hypothesis their proper place in the space of reasons rather than to preempt them. Engaging in such exchanges can advance each party’s understanding of the relevant domain.²⁷

When we consider the epistemic authority of teachers or educators, another argument against unrestricted preemptionism surfaces. Arguably, the fundamental goal of education is the formation of (good) intellectual character and the intellectual virtues this involves. It is hard to see, however, how the dictates of preemptionism could promote this goal. The guided-inquiry account would seem to be in a better position in this regard (for more on this see Jäger forthcoming).

An important question in this context is exactly how authorities can advance understanding in their interlocutors and whether, and if so, how understanding can be transmitted from one person to another. May authorities also serve as *generative* (as opposed to transmitting) sources of understanding? May they also serve as generative sources of knowledge?²⁸

²⁷ For critical discussions of Jäger’s account see, e.g., Zagzebski (2016); Croce (2018); Bungum (2018); Popowicz (2019); Stewart (2020); Grundmann (forthcoming).

²⁸ Many have argued that there are significant asymmetries between knowledge transmission and advancing understanding in interlocutors. Boyd (2017), Malfatti (2020), and Hazlett (this volume) argue against this claim.

6. Epistemic authority and epistemic virtues

Wright (2016) develops a virtue-epistemological argument against preemptionism. Taking the authority's perspective, she argues that the attitude required by preemptionism "should always be characterized as a vice" (567) since it will leave *the authority* "unresponsive to a wide range of reasons" (568). According to Wright, preemptionism yields the following egocentric principle:

"Egocentric Preemption Thesis

The fact that I (the authority) have a belief p is a reason for me to continue to believe p that replaces all reasons from others relevant to believing p " (2016:565).

However, Wright argues, following this principle is detrimental to the cultivation of epistemic virtues such as curiosity and intellectual openness. Instead, it fosters the epistemic vice of closed-mindedness.

Zagzebski might reply that, to begin with, in her account the authority need not see herself as an authority (2012:103), hence that the above principle does not apply to all authorities. More importantly, it is doubtful whether this egocentric version captures Zagzebski's preemptionism in the first place. The core claim, which may indeed be applied to authorities themselves, is not that "all reasons from others" (as Wright says) constitute preemptive reasons, but that an agent's *epistemic authorities* provide such reasons. Consequently, the correct egocentric version should only say that the fact that I (the authority) have a belief p is a reason for me to continue believing that p that replaces or neutralizes all relevant reasons from epistemically *less advanced* agents. This is compatible with the epistemic authority being open to learning from *their* superiors or even their epistemic peers. (Recall that authorities are rarely ultimate authorities.) Wright's argument does not show, therefore, that Zagzebski's preemptionism generally undermines the cultivation of virtues such as open-mindedness and curiosity for epistemic authorities.

Nonetheless, perhaps Wright's general idea can be restated in a way that avoids this response. According to preemptionism, the fact that I (the authority) have a belief p is a reason for me to continue to believe p that replaces all relevant reasons from less advanced interlocutors. However, in some domains the authority may profit from listening to them.

Granted, the professional cosmologist need not listen to what laypeople fantasize about life in outer space; the virologist need not square her views with what charlatans, quack experts, and their followers feel about pandemics and appropriate measures against them.²⁹ Yet, when it comes to disciplines such as philosophy, politics, or religion, things are not so straightforward. Arguably, in certain domains the advanced teacher often receives important intellectual input from their students. Seemingly naive questions from laypeople can alert the authority to structural lacunas in their noetic system or to blind spots in their realm of reasons and may thus help them in their reflective self-criticism and broaden their intellectual horizon. This way of taking Wright's virtue-argument chimes well with the idea of Socratic authorities who typically concede that they do not possess final answers themselves, but remain open to learning from others, even if the latter are intellectually less experienced.

A general question in this context is which virtues epistemic authorities must possess in order to fulfil their social-epistemic functions. Croce (2018) discusses (i) what he calls *research-oriented* abilities or virtues, including intellectual thoroughness, curiosity, creativity, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage. (ii) By contrast, authorities of the Socratic stripe, Croce argues, must rather have *novice-oriented* virtues such as intellectual generosity, maieutic ability, or sensitivity to the novice's epistemic needs. These are distinctively social epistemic virtues. In (2019b), Croce extends this two-tiered virtue approach to collective epistemic authority. Jäger and Malfatti (2020) also explore the role of authorities for restoring reflective equilibrium in the layperson's system of thought. In order to serve that role, they argue, authorities must exercise the social-epistemic virtue of "epistemic empathy."

7. Questions for future research, and some downsides of epistemic authority

Epistemic authority is a novel topic in social epistemology³⁰ and many interesting questions await deeper exploration. Among them are the following.

One interesting (and to my knowledge unexplored) question is how general asserter authority interacts with disciplinary, domain specific authority. For example, if *A* has disciplinary authority, can this strengthen *A*'s asserter authority regarding assertions related to the discipline? Moreover, I noted that epistemic authority may not only concern true belief,

²⁹ For a taxonomy and discussion of various kinds of false authorities see Jäger (2024).

³⁰ For early work, however, see Young (1974); Bocheński (1974); and De George (1985).

knowledge, and understanding, but more generally epistemic superiority regarding epistemic goods. What are these goods, and how do they relate to each other? Popowicz (2019, 2021) suggests that we should also consider (reliable) doxastic practices and proposes what may be called a *doxastic practice approach* to epistemic authority. The core idea is that authorities possess superior skills to engage in the relevant practices, plus abilities to teach these skills. There is potential here for broader systematic exploration, especially with regard to the inquirer model of authority mentioned in section 5.3.

Doxastic practices are cultivated by communities; this brings us back to collective epistemic authority. Though some authors have begun discussing this topic (see footnote 5), it is still underexplored. For example, if there is such a thing as collective authority, how promising are summativist approaches according to which the group enjoys authority only if most (or many? some? at least one?) of its members have it? Could individual group members possess authority just in virtue of their group membership even though individually they lack some of the relevant competences or information possessed by other group members or the group as a whole?

Another family of topics awaiting more attention concerns the down sides of epistemic authority. The overall perspective in this chapter has so far been rather optimistic: I have emphasized the service role of epistemic authorities in their communities, their potential to disseminate knowledge, foster understanding, and so on. Other aspects are less rosy. I mentioned the role of pseudo authorities in the rise of conspiracy and fake news culture. Things can also go wrong for the authorities themselves. For example, Davis (2016) takes up Fricker's (2007) notion of *credibility excess*, arguing that it is not only giving people *less* epistemic trust than they deserve, but also projecting more competence onto them than they can reasonably be expected to have, that can result from prejudice or stereotypical thinking and constitute an epistemic injustice. Such *identity-prejudicial credibility excess*, she argues, can harm experts and authorities in various ways.³¹

On the other hand, epistemic authorities have power over their interlocutors which, like all kinds of power, can be misused. A drastic example is what Lackey (2021) calls "predatory experts", i.e., expert authorities who misuse their authority and power by

³¹ As in the case of Uma Narayan, an "Indian professor in a western academic space" who found herself frequently consulted by students on topics such "Indian novels in English, ... Goddess-worship rituals in South India," etc., none of which fell into Narayan's area of expertise (Davis 2016:488). For more on Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice see McGlynn (this volume).

systematically abusing people's epistemic trust in them.³² A well-known example is the physician Larry Nassar, who served as national medical coordinator for the USA Gymnastics and in this role, as well as in other functions, sexually abused at least 265 girls and young women. Such cases support Coady's (2014) argument that often selective epistemic mistrust, rather than trust, in authorities may be the better part of wisdom. One important question is what forms of power and abuses are specific to epistemic authority.

In a famous passage in *Of Miracles* (art. 1), Hume says that a person "delirious or noted for falsehood and villainy has no manner of authority with us". Taken as a descriptive claim, this verdict—unfortunately—is not generally true. But Hume might intend it to be heard as a normative claim: irrational, unreliable, deceptive, or morally misguided agents *should* have no authority over us. By providing insight into the theoretical nature of authority, social epistemology helps us live up to this demand.³³

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³² The analysis of such phenomena is a topic of what Fallis (this volume) dubs "adversarial epistemology."

³³ Earlier versions of this essay or portions thereof have been presented to research seminars at Erlangen, Innsbruck, and at Humboldt University, Berlin. For helpful comments I am especially indebted to Katherine Dormandy, Thomas Grundmann, Romy Jaster, Geert Keil, Arnon Keren, Dirk Koppelberg, Federica I. Malfatti, Aidan McGlynn, Michael Vollmer, Jonas Wittwer, Johanna Stüger, and an anonymous referee for OUP.

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